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Many Jewish soldiers in the United States military experienced prejudice and anti-Semitism.

Jewish veterans recall struggle

Documentary looks at anti-Semitism in WWII

By Daniel M. Kimmel

At my shul I'm privileged to know a number of men who are World War II veterans and have spoken about their experiences. Watching "From Philadelphia to the Front," a

Movie Maven

2006 documentary short that focuses on six Jewish men from South Philadelphia, reminded me of those conversations. Filmmakers Judy Gelles and Marianne Bernstein got them to open up not only about their wartime service, but how they fit into the military as Jewish men, and how their experiences impacted their later lives.

For later generations it's hard to imagine not only how prevalent anti-Semitism once was in mainstream America, but how matter-of-fact people were when they encountered it. One man was given the task of censoring the mail – making sure soldiers didn't inadvertently reveal classified war information. He encountered anti-Jewish remarks and he brought them to a superior pointing out they were tantamount to Nazi propaganda.

The reply? Many Americans feel exactly the same way.

Yet there's also the amusing encounter with a small town Alabama lad who announces that they'd never seen a Jew in his obscure community. Would the Jewish soldier mind if he the Alabama boy just looked at him? (One hopes he reported home, "They're just like us!")

Though many of the soldiers interviewed were not particularly religious, the film includes the incredibly moving scene when a soldier leads a service – after the liberation of one of the death camps – in what he says is a dual capacity: as part of the United States Army and as a representative of the American Jewish community. During the war, we're told, some of the soldiers kept two sets of dog tags. One identified them as Jewish, the other did not. The latter were worn when fighting the Germans because of the very real fear of what would happen if they were captured.

After the war some elected to put their experiences behind them. One declares he's never seen a movie dealing with the Germans or the Holocaust. Yet another has written 15 books on the First and Second World War since his retirement. A third

man says his experience as a Marine toughened him up to fight for what was right for everyone, not just his fellow Jews. When a union boss told him to get rid of some African-American workers (using racist terms), he made it clear that not only would he not comply, he insisted they be granted union membership. And so they were.

The experiences of the Jewish veterans of the "Greatest Generation" are a small part of a larger story, but thank goodness those experiences are being recorded while there's still time. One way synagogues might open the conversation in their own communities is by showing this marvelous little film.

Daniel M. Kimmel, a Boston-based film critic and author, reviews Jewish films for the Advocate. He lectures widely on a variety of film-related topics and can be reached at daniel.kimmel@rcn.com.

"From Philadelphia to the Front" is available through the National Center for Jewish Film for \$36. Public performance rights separately available. Call (781) 736-8600 or go to www.jewishfilm.org.